

Kalakaua first geothermal booster

By Bob Krauss
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The report of a meeting between King David Kalakaua and inventor Thomas Edison in 1881 indicates that the Kalakaua administration considered the sale of power from Kilauea Volcano as a source of revenue for the Hawaiian kingdom.

Kalakaua met Edison at work in his rooms on Fifth Avenue in New York while the king was on his world tour. He was accompanied at the meeting by William Armstrong, his attorney general and commissioner of immigration.

A report of the meeting appeared in the New York Sun of Monday, Sept. 26, 1881, after Edison became famous as the inventor of the electric light.

The story described Kalakaua as a "good listener . . . He was astonished to hear that Edison was going to sell power as well as light."

Taking part in the conversation, Armstrong asked Edison if he could lay his power lines in submarine cables. "Well, it would cost so much, that's all," Edison replied.

"Because you might come over to the Sandwich Islands," Armstrong said, "where we have a volcano that burns a thousand million tons of coal a day, and you could put your boilers on top of the volcano and get power enough to supply this country."

Edison asked if that's where Hawaii got its coal.

"No, we get our coal from Australia," said Armstrong. "But we build great hopes on that volcano. When we sell out we expect to get more for that than for anything we have got."

The Sun reported that the king laughed heartily at this exchange. He also displayed interest in and considerable understanding of electricity.

Edison's rooms were entirely lit by electric power, which he demonstrated by

dimming the lights and snapping them on and off.

"How do you produce those carbon auroras?" the king asked.

According to the story, Edison launched into a description of his lamp couched in homely language, and illustrated with bits of wire and portions of his apparatus.

Armstrong explained to the inventor that his majesty was especially interested in the electric light because his capital, Honolulu, must be lighted soon by something superior to the kerosene then in use.

"The monarch is undecided whether the new illuminator shall be gas or electricity," Armstrong told Edison. "But he has resolved to wait until electricity has had a full and practical trial."

After Kalakaua returned to Hawaii, he had electric lights installed at the new Iolani Palace. When they were turned on in July 1886, they were the first electric lights in the city of Honolulu.



King David Kalakaua
A "good listener"